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IFAS EXTENSION

Friday's Feature

By

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March gardening tips

It's time for the spring show. This is a very pretty time of year along the Gulf Coast and a pleasant time to work outside. Many people are anxious to get into the garden, and gardening does begin in earnest during March. Just remember we are still subject to a late frost or freeze.

Nowhere in the landscape is guessing what the weather may do more critical than in a vegetable garden. If you guess right, you get the garden in early and beat the hordes of summer vegetable pests. Too early however and you'll take a beating from a late frost or freeze.

One way to improve the odds is to grow plants in small containers or seed trays in a well lighted area, or out-of-doors, but then bring them in if there's a chance of frost. These young starts can then be planted in the vegetable garden after the danger of frost has passed.

There are many vegetables that can be planted this month, both warm season and cool season types. For a detailed list of planting times, take a look at the UF/IFAS publication entitled "Florida Vegetable Gardening Guide." It's available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/VH021> or by calling your local Extension office.

March is the month to think about fertilizing your young woody ornamentals. Trees and shrubs that have been in the ground less than three years could benefit from an application of fertilizer.

When choosing a fertilizer for woody ornamentals select one that has a phosphorus content (middle number) between zero and two. Historically, the ratio of nitrogen to potassium for landscape plants has been in the range of 1:1 to 2:1. So, a 15-0-15, a 16-2-16 or a 15-2-15 would be a good general-purpose fertilizer for most of your landscape trees and shrubs. Always look for fertilizers with thirty to fifty percent of the total nitrogen in a slow release form.

It's not necessary to pull back the mulch when you apply fertilizer. Doing so might needlessly injure roots growing up into the mulch. Just scatter the fertilizer over the mulch and water it in.

If your trees and shrubs are older, are healthy and you are pleased with their appearance, then fertilization may not be required. For healthy trees and shrubs, fertilize the natural way. Allow the plant's leaves to fall around them and stay there. This natural leaf litter will eventually decompose and return nutrients to the soil providing the plants with all the slow release nutrients they need.

The exception to this is fallen camellia blooms. Remove spent camellia blooms as they fall to help prevent petal blight, a fungal disease which causes brown spots on the petals and causes the blooms to fall prematurely.

Lawns are beginning to show signs of coming out of dormancy. It's important now to rake fallen leaves and pine needles. Do not allow them to accumulate and smother the lawn grass. Removing the leaf cover will increase the effectiveness of fertilizers and pesticides.

And for those that have ornamental grasses in the landscape you may want to consider pruning them. Ideally, ornamental grasses should be pruned just prior to new shoot growth.

For deciduous grasses, such as Miscanthus, the old foliage may be completely removed within inches of the soil. For evergreen grasses, such as muhly grass, the ragged, dead tips of leaves can be removed to neaten the appearance of the plant. Many evergreen grasses recover quickly from a heavier pruning.

March is a great month for gardening but don't get too anxious. Some of these activities are best left for late March or even April.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>